

Responsible reporting to prevent suicide contagion

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A growing body of evidence suggests that exposure to suicide may increase the likelihood that an exposed individual may consider suicide themselves.^{1,2} One of the proposed mechanisms that could explain this apparent contagion effect is the reporting of suicides by the media. People reading or hearing about a suicide may identify with the deceased, and consequently may also consider the cause of death as an acceptable solution to their own problems.³

Many studies have linked media reporting of suicides to subsequent suicidal behaviour. One elegant example surveyed newspaper reporting of teen suicides in the United States from 1988 to 1996, comparing communities in which there was a single teen suicide to those in which there was a cluster of teen suicides.⁴ In communities where there was a suicide cluster, newspaper reporting of the first suicide was more likely to be on the front page of the newspaper, have a headline that included the word “suicide,” and describe the methods used in the suicidal act.⁴ Compelling research such as this has led organizations invested in suicide prevention, including the World Health Organization (WHO), to endorse guidelines for how journalists can report responsibly on suicide.⁵ Such guidelines include clear instructions that, when followed, are expected to reduce the possibility of suicide contagion and therefore prevent further deaths.⁵

In linked research, Sinyor and colleagues examine print and online media reports of 947 suicide deaths in the city of Toronto from 2011 to 2014, to investigate whether aspects of these reports were associated with subsequent increases or decreases in suicide.⁶ One of the most striking features of this study is how commonly media reports on suicide described the method used, despite clear guidelines to avoid this practice.⁵ Almost half (49.5%) of the 6367 articles that reported on these suicides identified the method used, and one in eight (12.8%) described the method in specific detail. Consistent with other studies,⁴ Sinyor and colleagues’ analyses make clear that including details of the method is associated with an increase in subsequent suicides.

The authors also found that reports on celebrity suicides are associated with an increase in subsequent suicides. Celebrity suicides are potentially dangerous because celebrities are often

KEY POINTS

- There is strong evidence that suicidal behaviour may be contagious, and that media reports on suicides may contribute to the contagion effect.
- Media reports on suicides that include details of the suicide method, and those about celebrity suicide, are associated with increased subsequent suicides in the population.
- Responsible reporting can help prevent the suicide contagion effect, and possibly make positive contributions toward suicide prevention.
- Future research should examine whether suicide contagion effects may be amplified through social media or other media formats.

considered role models, and vulnerable individuals may copy the suicidal act.³ For this reason, the WHO guidelines on media reporting on suicide clearly recommend exercising caution when reporting celebrity suicides.⁵ This issue is particularly concerning given recent suicides by high-profile celebrities. For example, the 2014 suicide of actor and comedian Robin Williams saw widespread international media coverage. Subsequent research found that in the months following the suicide and ensuing media coverage, there were increases in the use of harmful online search engine terms related to suicide (e.g., “hanging”),⁷ and more deaths by suicide than expected in the US.⁸

Adherence to guidelines on responsible reporting of suicide may become more important in an increasingly fragmented media landscape, particularly online. It’s unclear, for example, what the consequences may be of disseminating potentially harmful information about a suicide via social media. In June 2018, after the suicides of fashion designer Kate Spade and celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, numerous major media outlets in the US reported on social media the method used in both suicides, in some instances including explicit details. Rapidly changing social media platforms make it difficult to conduct rigorous research that is also timely; however, there is no doubt that the broad reach of many platforms hastens dissemination of information that could potentially create immense harm.

Reassuringly, research on celebrity suicide also provides a glimmer of hope. In the three months following Robin Williams' death, helpful search engine terms related to suicide (e.g., "hot-line") also increased.⁷ Additionally, media coverage of the suicide that was considered informational was associated with more frequent outreach to others, and a greater willingness to seek treatment.⁹ This underlines the potential for positive effects of reporting on suicide. The WHO guidelines on media reporting on suicide recommend several potentially helpful practices, including providing accurate information about where to seek help, and educating the public about suicide and suicide prevention.⁵ Accordingly, it is disheartening to see in Sinyor and colleagues' study how rarely the media used reports on suicide as an opportunity to engage in recommended practices that may protect against further suicides. Fewer than one in five articles discussed alternatives to suicide, and less than 2% mentioned community resources for those considering suicide.⁵

Journalists have a key role to play in public discourse on current issues facing society. It is very encouraging that discussions about mental health and suicide have become prominent in recent years, and that the stigma attached to mental health is dropping.¹⁰ The media has likely played an important role in this, as open discussions about mental health and how it relates to current events can serve to educate the public about the causes and consequences of mental illness. However, Sinyor and colleagues' new paper⁶ must close the book on whether the media may do harm when reporting on suicide, and whether there is sufficient justification for guidelines on reporting on suicide. The media have an obligation to report the news, but also have the potential to influence positive change. Responsible reporting can encourage conversations about suicidality, stimulate help-seeking behaviour among individuals considering suicide, and make important contributions in the fight against mental health stigma.

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